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FOREIGN AFFAIRS | Flora Lewis

No Easy Way Out

PARIS

American leaders came home from Geneva with the impression that Moscow now would like to find a way out of Afghanistan. This was conveyed in public by Soviet spokesmen, who repeatedly spoke of the need for a "political solution," as well as officially in private. They emphasized the role that United Nations mediation should play.

There are many reasons to take this seriously, but also reasons that it won't be as easy as a simple ukase from Moscow.

The war has dragged on for six years without any "light at the end of the tunnel," to dispense with the Vietnam comparison. The cost and casualties have become a serious nuisance for the Kremlin, though not intolerable. They could go on indefinitely.

In fact, NATO intelligence shows an increase in Soviet military action in Afghanistan recently, but that is not considered a contradictory sign to Moscow's message about a settlement. It could well be a last effort to achieve as favorable a military situation as possible before an attempted truce.

The war in Afghanistan has become a serious irritant in Moscow's relations with the third world, as the last United Nations condemnation showed. It is also an obstacle in Moscow's search for better relations with China, and President Reagan has made clear that the United States considers it a major test of Soviet intentions.

So there are internal and external reasons to support the assessment that Moscow is prepared to seek a compromise. They may not be the most important, however. The spread of militant Iranian-type fundamentalism has become a frightening new factor in the situation, worrisome throughout the region and possibly a threat to the stability of the Soviet Moslem population.

In addition to the three million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, there are a million in Iran. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees found that they are well received, established in towns and cities as well as in

special settlements, and becoming thoroughly indoctrinated with the Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas. Fundamentalism is also gaining in the Afghan camps in Pakistan, already an Islamic state but trying to hold Iranian extremism at bay.

The evidence is that this trend can only grow as the conflict drags on. Everybody involved except Iran has to see it as a danger for the whole

area. It is one point in this brutal war, which America first saw as a Soviet drive toward the Persian Gulf, where United States and Soviet interests have come to coincide. The radical religious menace is proving greater than the Soviet menace in a way that American arms to the dauntless Afghan rebels cannot confront.

Moscow has to realize that no possible agreement could leave the puppet regime of Babrak Karmal in place. It is much too hated and discredited. Nor is it conceivable that any kind of international guarantees could prop him up, even if the U.S. agreed to try, which it will not and should not do.

At most, America could agree to stop providing arms to the rebels and give some economic aid to a new, acceptable regime, which would have to be independent and nonaligned. Even so, it would be extravagant to expect Pakistan to seal the border. It has always been an open border, which Afghans well know how to cross, and estimates are that it would take an army double the size of Pakistan's to close it effectively.

The greatest problem, then, is to create a government that could hold its own and install peace by majority consent. The sad fact is that no such alternative regime is visible. There is no government in exile. The rebels are divided and hostile among themselves. The Russians have created a monster that they cannot dump and replace.

In a way, their situation is worse than America's in Vietnam because there is no Hanoi to move in, impose order and let them off the hook, even in ignominy. An unprepared pullout would leave chaos, not a new non-Soviet order. This is certainly Moscow's fault and it helps explain why the Russians are willing to talk to the United States about Afghanistan.

It is also why America should repress the temptation to gloat about the Kremlin's trouble, and try to help fashion a competent substitute that could be installed with international support in Kabul. This will take time, and it is probably beyond the capacity of U.N. mediators. America should support political talks among the rebels now looking to the day when a new regime can be organized. Even if Moscow has good new intentions, it won't be enough to end the war. □